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*Edited by Professor J. H. Elliott, The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and  
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# Neostoicism and the early modern state

Gerhard Oestreich

Edited by  
BRIGITTA OESTREICH  
and  
H. G. KOENIGSBERGER

Translated by  
DAVID McLINTOCK

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## Foreword

In 1976, the editors of the series Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History suggested to Gerhard Oestreich the publication of an English version of his collection of essays, *Geist und Gestalt des frühmodernen Staates*.<sup>1</sup> At first it was thought that only relatively minor changes would be needed, notably the substitution of some more recent essays of wider interest for two of the highly specialized and technical articles. These substitutions have become chapters 9<sup>2</sup> and 10<sup>3</sup> in this book. Oestreich, however, decided on a complete recasting of the first four chapters, those concerned most directly with Lipsius, Neostoicism and the Netherlands movement. At the time of his premature death, in 1978, he had not fully completed this task and would undoubtedly have wished to make some emendations, especially to the second half of the rewritten text. Nevertheless, we thought that the last draft was sufficiently close to Oestreich's intention to represent fairly his last rethinking and reformulation of his subject. The final German text of these chapters (1–7) which was then used for the present translation was prepared by Brigitta Oestreich. The remaining chapters are essays translated substantially from the form in which they appeared originally, from 1953 onwards, and in which they were then republished in *Geist und Gestalt des frühmodernen Staates*.

Neostoicism was a movement which has been known to historians in this country mainly in its French literary and philosophical form. Its political and social influence, radiating largely from the Netherlands, has hardly been appreciated at all and on the Continent it came to be forgotten during the eighteenth century. Yet in the seventeenth century this influence was enormously powerful. At a time of the most bitter religious, political and social conflicts, it provided a practical philosophy, based on reason, Christian morality and classical learning, for virtually every sphere of life.

<sup>1</sup> Berlin, Duncker & Humblot 1969.

<sup>2</sup> 'Policey und Prudentia civilis in der barocken Gesellschaft von Stadt und Staat', in A. Schöne (ed): *Stadt-Schule-Universität-Buchwesen und die deutsche Literatur im 17. Jahrhundert*. Munich, C. H. Beck 1976, pp. 10–21.

<sup>3</sup> 'Vom Herrschaftsvertrag zur Verfassungsurkunde. Die "Regierungsformen" des 17. Jahrhunderts als konstitutionelle Instrumente', in R. Vierhaus (ed): *Herrschaftsverträge, Wahlkapitulationen, Fundamentalgesetze*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1977, pp. 45–67.

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### *Foreword*

It by-passed the deadly disputes of the theologians and the disruptive struggles over the form of governments and the distribution of power within states. In their place it put the increase of the power and efficiency of the state itself and the political and social discipline of its citizens through the effects of education. This eminently useful and respectable philosophy found favour with the ‘establishments’ in both monarchies and republics. It found favour, above all, in France and Germany, where the principalities and cities composing the Holy Roman Empire were at this time still in the process of transforming themselves into fully fledged states.

Unfortunately, Oestreich was never able to write the grand, overall history of early modern Europe which he had in mind. He visualized it as an *histoire totale*, wider perhaps even than that of the modern French school. The outlines, at least, of such a history, are clearly discernible in this book.<sup>4</sup> The most immediate effect of the Netherlands movement was on the organization and morale of armies; but in the long run it affected all classes. Max Weber had stressed the spread of rationalization and of the Protestant ethic in the development of modern society. Oestreich adds to this the social discipline and self-discipline, and the consequent self-confidence, inculcated by Neostoicism. These were crucial in the later development of modern industrialism and political democracy.

Yet Oestreich does not regard Neostoicism as the only important formative influence, even in the seventeenth century. Science and literature had other, equally important, sources as well. In political thought he stressed the tradition of natural law and of the religious covenants which developed into social contracts and modern constitutions. Constitutions and institutions themselves form a substantial part of his enquiries. In a clear break with traditional German historiography, Oestreich insisted on the importance of the estates and their representative institutions during the very period of the formation of absolutist rule in the German principalities and suggested reasons for this continued importance. The counterpoint of all these developments with the influence of Neostoicism forms the second part of this book, especially in chapters 8–10. These are followed by three chapters on the development of the German territorial states, with particular emphasis on their military organizations and on the survival of local autonomy and of representative institutions (chapters 11–13). Chapters 14 and 15 finally place these German developments within a European context.

H. G. KOENIGSBERGER  
 BRIGITTA OESTREICH

<sup>4</sup> See also the most recently published collection of Oestreich’s articles: G. Oestreich, *Strukturprobleme der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Brigitta Oestreich, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot 1980.